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Buddhism: Past, Present and Future

Past: The Origins of Buddhism

The first historical Buddha was Shakyamuni, who lived in India about 3,000 years ago. He stated that his purpose was to enable humankind to overcome sufferings and to live truly happy and fulfilled lives. The Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni's foremost teaching, points out that all people have the potential for *enlightenment*—a condition of immeasurable wisdom, compassion, energy and joy.

For centuries an emphasis on monasticism and complex doctrines restricted Buddhism to a small elite. The universally accessible Buddhist practice was finally established by Nichiren Daishonin on April 28, 1253, when he began chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo and teaching others to do likewise.

In these words he embodied and revealed the universal truth to which he had attained enlightenment. He taught that all people, regardless of their capacity, education or station in life, could activate their innate potential by merely chanting this phrase.

The name “Buddha” is the Sanskrit word meaning “awakened one.” A Buddha is not a supernatural or special being, but a human being who has manifested the highest condition of life. It should be noted that Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism places great importance on the actual proof of its value in daily life. Thus it differs substantially from the meditations used by other teachings to attain a kind of temporary spiritual peace—or those teachings which allow practitioners to ignore their inner weaknesses in pursuit of an other-worldly paradise.

Although Buddhism has a long tradition, it is beneficial to modern life because it is a relevant and universal teaching. Nichiren Daishonin's teachings truly began to flourish throughout the world during the twentieth century—and they continue to do so as more people discover the power of Buddhism to actually create happiness in their daily lives.

Present: Happiness In This Life

Many positive changes, such as better health, a happier family, or an improved financial situation will be seen early on in one's practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. The true benefit, however, lies in the deep-rooted wisdom, good fortune, and joyful state of life which one develops over a period of time. Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is therefore a lifelong practice. The practice of Buddhism revitalizes human life so that one can confidently challenge problems and courageously pursue individual goals.

Throughout history, people have attempted to improve their lot by reforming their environment—for example: by overthrowing oppressive governments, by campaigning against war and poverty, or by protesting against injustice. Despite such sincere and exhaustive efforts, our fundamental problems endure because, according to Buddhist teachings, we have not yet reformed the inner world of the individual.

Buddhism teaches that the individual human being and the environment are inseparable, and therefore society reflects the people who live in it. If we continue to base our individual actions on misplaced selfishness, fear, greed and arrogance, then similar distortions will continue to be reflected in our surroundings.

“Human Revolution” refers to the process of elevating one's fundamental life condition through the practice of Buddhism. Upon this basis, all personal traits and attributes, even negative ones, will come to function positively to benefit oneself and others.

“Human Revolution” implies a change, not of personality or individual characteristics, but to live life with the determination to bring forth the Buddha nature, to change karma for the better, to perfect character, to overcome obstacles, to attain enlightenment is this lifetime, and to lay the groundwork for world peace through individual happiness.

Future: World Peace a Reality

Seen from one viewpoint, human history appears to be little more than one war after another, with brief, intermittent periods of unstable peace. Financial crises, environmental destruction, terrorism, ineffectual leadership and a host of other seemingly insoluble problems create chaos at every turn. Add to this the ever-present threat of weapons of mass destruction and it is difficult to know where to begin to make the challenge.

The real threat is that our attention to the external situation will rob us of the energy and creativity we need to change ourselves. Each of us must realize that only the defeat of our own delusions will ultimately result in the defeat of the evils in our world.

To achieve true respect for the dignity of all life, which is crucial to achieving lasting peace, is among the most difficult of all undertakings. The Buddhist movement, consisting of the steadfast efforts of the individual to promote such respect in himself and others, is a gradual but sure process.

Soka Gakkai International President Daisaku Ikeda has said that “a great revolution of character in just a single person will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and, further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind.”

By chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo one can develop the highest personal potential and the confidence to overcome life's adversities, rather than succumb to them. Growing in this way, a person becomes more and more compassionate and capable of contributing to the happiness of others. As one person after another brings forth their inherent Buddha nature by chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo and develops a progressively more enlightened way of life—then an enduring basis is created for a peaceful and harmonious society. This is not just the dream of Buddhism, but the expressed specific goal.

To learn more about the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin or Soka Gakkai International, please visit online at www.sgi-usa.org, or call or visit your local SGI-USA community center.